



PROLIFERATION WATCH:

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U.S. Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs

Next Steps in Biological Weapons Disarmament *by Senator John Glenn*

This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), which outlawed one of the world's most potentially destructive weapons of war. As insurance against the risk that nations will once again produce or use such weapons, the international community is slowly moving to strengthen that treaty. If these efforts fail, the world may face new horrors that could jeopardize not just our national security, but the planet itself.

The BWC bans the development or production of agents and toxins, as well as the means to deliver them "for hostile purposes or in armed conflict." Yet the line between civilian and military purposes (like the line between research and development) is not always clear. The treaty also permits activities that are justifiable for "prophylactic, protective or other peaceful purposes" but is silent on the types or quantities of agents or toxins that are appropriate for such uses.

As a result, there is a risk that "defensive" research can disguise an offensive military program. Iraq, for example, recently claimed it was engaged in "defensive" BW research (Iraq signed the BWC in 1972 but never ratified it) and Japan -- well before the BWC came into force -- termed its secret wartime BW program the "Epidemic Prevention and Water Supply Unit."

The problems of verifying the *intent* of medical research performed under military auspices, and the difficulty of detecting the development or use of biological weapons, have led to disputes between parties to the BWC. The United States claimed in 1981 that an unusual outbreak of anthrax in Sverdlovsk in 1979 was a Soviet violation of the BWC. The Soviets denied the claim and attributed the outbreak to natural causes; only recently have senior Russian officials challenged

the once-official story. The U.S. has also accused the Soviet Union of using mycotoxins ("Yellow Rain") in Laos, Kampuchea, and Afghanistan.

Some experts have suggested that short-notice, on-site inspections of declared facilities -- like those envisioned for the CW Convention -- may help to resolve these types of disputes. But inspections can only go so far in verifying compliance with disarmament agreements -- a point well recognized in early U.S. efforts to halt nuclear proliferation. As stated in the Acheson/Lilienthal Report of 1946: *"So long as intrinsically dangerous activities may be carried on by nations, rivalries are inevitable and fears are engendered that place so great a pressure upon a system of international enforcement by police methods that no degree of ingenuity or technical competence could possibly hope to cope with them."* This conclusion is especially relevant to verifying the BWC, given the availability of the commodities and expertise needed to produce such weapons.

The Final Declaration of last year's BWC Review Conference offers a way out of this dilemma by encouraging an effort *"to elaborate an international programme of vaccine development for the prevention of diseases involving scientific and technical personnel from developing countries which are States Parties to the Convention. The Conference recognizes that such a programme might not only enhance peaceful international cooperation in biotechnology but also will contribute to improving health care in developing countries and provide transparency in accordance with the Convention."*

Although this proposal raises some dilemmas of its own, it may help finesse a key verification problem of the BWC. We will be monitoring relevant developments in future issues of *Proliferation Watch*.

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